

SPELEOLOGICAL REFERENCES IN MÁTYÁS BÉL'S WORK: "DESCRIPTION OF KOMÁROM COUNTY"

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In 1989, 250 fifty years after it had been written Mátyás Bél's work: "Description of Komárom County" was published in 570 copies by favour of the Attila József County Library of Tatabánya. This scientific compilation – beyond its other significances: geographical, archaeological, historical, ethnographical, etc. – can be regarded as a basic source for the caves of the given territory.

Mátyás Bél (1684–1749), a Protestant priest and teacher was a well-known scholar in the first half of the 18th century. During his whole lifetime his main intention was to give a detailed general description of contemporary Hungary. This enormous work compiled in Latin, the language of science of the age, was carried out on the basis of his self-experiences and the data collected by him while travelling in the country.

The first part of the great work: "Historical and Geographical Description of Modern Hungary", the *Notitia Hungariae novae historico-geographica (Partis primae Cis-Danubianae, tomus I–IV, Wien 1735–1742)* presenting the nine counties of Cis-Danubia was published still in the author's lifetime, while the description of another county came to light shortly after his death. The description of some further counties – that Komárom county among them – has come down to us in manuscript form.

The Description of Komárom County in manuscript – the *Descriptio Comitatus Comaromiensis* – most probably was written between 1723–1742, it cannot be exactly dated in lack from data. László Vilimszky, the translator, writing about the troublesome history of the material states: "the translation and edition of the volume dealing with Komárom county have not been accomplished till now. The excuse for it is, first of all, that from the heritage of the author the manuscript was taken to the archives of the archbishop of Kalocsa, then to the archives of the prince-archbishop of Esztergom and it was damaged during the transportation. Being dropped into water it has become obscure and even illegible at several places. Its complete destruction was prevented by the generous care of József Bencsik, priest and jurist,

who was curator of the library and archives of Esztergom, and realizing the poor condition of the original copy he copied whole volume by hand, or rather, as he himself wrote: the part that he could still figure out with great difficulties".

The Hungarian translation of the work was retarded by the rough draft-form of the original manuscript and the uncommon terminology of the author: the sequence of sentences and the latin phraseology that was difficult to understand. At last, this difficult task bringing up several problems of interpretation that needed the study of the sources was recently carried out by László Vilimszky who took the copy of Bencsik for basis. As a result of his skilled interpretation the reader could take the book in his hands on the 240. anniversary of the author's death.

In the first volume of the work Mátyás Bél describes the natural phenomena of the county. It is also here that he presents, among others, the karst areas significant from speleological point of view, i.e. the whole territory of the Gerecse Mountains, except for the North-Eastern spurs of the Vértes Mountains and environment of Esztergom. When giving an overall picture of the nature (mountains, waters, woods, beasts, etc.) the author offers rather detailed accounts of three caves: the *Szelim Cave* (Szelim-lyuk), the *Pisznice Cave* (Pisznice-barlang) and the *Peskő Cave* (Peskő-barlang). Later chapters of the volume dealing with the settlements from administrative and economic point of view mention three more karst phenomena, or caves (?) not as much detailed as before.

The cave known today as *Szelim Cave* (Szelim-lyuk) is called the cave of *St. Vít* (Szent Vít-barlang) by Mátyás Bél. He gives a true picture of the cave indicating its measurements, describing the localization and form of its entrances and galleries, and the characteristic splitting of the roof. His data are relevant even today. The legend of the cave is related by him as follows: "It is told, that in old times when the barbarian Tatars and Turks wanted to take the Hungarian people into captivity they hid themselves in this cave. A woman, who, because of the crying of her baby, came out of the cave and was taken

prisoner disclosed them. Discovering their whereabouts the barbarians as otherwise they could not get into the cave broke the rock through from above and made a fire there. Everybody was suffocated in the smoke".

The following lines prove that the author visited the caves in person: "We saw the bones of the murdered people gathered into two piles big enough to bring accusations against them, not to mention the ones negligently destroyed by the ancients. It is a strong evidence of the wilful effort and endeavour of the barbarians to massacre this miserable mass of people, as there were a lot of our fellow-citizens at any other place, whom they could have destroyed... As for me, I am inclined to impute this crime to the two devastations of the Tatars committed against the country and the king during the reign of Béla the Fourth".

This latter statement is especially interesting, as a better known version of the legend brings the massacre of the Szelim Cave in connection with the Turkish invasion of the 15th century. Archaeological research of the 1930-s carried out on the site fully proved the truth of the suppositions of Mátyás Bél. It was established that the bone-remains really originate from the 13th century, from the time of the Tatar invasion. The cave has become famous in the country and even all over the world for its rich archaeological and palaeontological finds of its lower deposits.

The author writes about the *Pisznice Cave* (*Pisznice-barlang*), the most important cave system of the central part of the Gerecse Mountains as follows: "It is easy to get in, the opening is round, large, similar to a vaulted chamber. The inner sections are large, too; especially the ones that are arched from the entrance as if a built, solid vault. These chambers offer enough room for about 30 people. This cave is nearly as large as the previous one and of similar shape. Further parts of it go downward and one with a lamp in his hand can reveal several holes and cavities leading here upwards there downwards, then again towards further curves. The galleries are varied and dangerous; water flows at several places and there are a lot of ponds. Further on the galleries are upon each other and lead to shafts and wells that were formed... Some people say that the whole mountain is pierced throughout by caves". The author excellently presents the spherical cavities of the cave and well describes the complexity of the multi-level cavity system filled with wet and muddy guano. The thorough and correct description allows the supposition that the author visited the cave in person and he himself made the survey of data.

The *Peskő Cave* (*Peskő-barlang*) of the Gerecse Mountains, that is insignificant as for its measure, even though for long known for its remarkable entrance is characterized by Mátyás Bél as follows: "The cave is long and narrow at the lower part. Its roominess is not big (...) and it is difficult and dangerous to access... Then a triangular cavity opens that can be seen from afar". Though he depicts with vivid colours how difficult it is to reach the cave he writes only shortly about the cave itself, and it does not help us to clarify the method of the data survey.

When describing the town Tata, the author mentions a spring situated on a vineyard-hill at the Eastern part

of the town "... on the very top of the hill the water spurts out of an open amphora-like hole the inner part of which is not known; it spurts out so strongly as if coming from a significant depth. It sparking rushes up then falls down and forms a small lake of hundred steps that is good for a warm bath". Thanks to his vivid description of the environment and the special functioning the spring could have been identified with the well explored *Angyal-forrás* Cave that has dried up in the last decades as a result of subsidence of karst water level.

The next cave-description is also given in the chapter on Tata: "Where the town ends, at the eastern region next to the fish-pond, on its slopy bank we have seen a cave vaulted with tufa so big that on both sides it could accommodate 100-100 people bending towards the centre. A spring has its source there coming up from the depth of the cave. Once the water had spouted up but then it was swallowed again and has never run up again". The cave characterized with these words most probably opened in the hill-side situated under the present-day secondary school of the town and was completely destroyed during the exploitation of the travertine mine that had worked here.

According to Mátyás Bél the *Királykút of Neszmély* ... "springs up at the foot of the hill opposite to the village and soon... it disappears in a gallery beneath the surface of the earth". Today we do not know any more this rather interesting karst-phenomenon, it stopped working since then and it could not have been traced.

Short references can be found in the work to the *Esterházy stone-niche* next to the Szelim Cave and to the cave of the *Tükör-forrás*, as well. In lack of a detailed description they could not be interpreted.

The valuation of the work can not divert our attention from the merits of its author. The thoroughness and the way of composition of the passages presented here clearly prove that the author has given his descriptions on the basis of his personal experiences. He was not satisfied with being merely a simple visitor he searched the caves with the high standards of a scholar interested in every detail. His thorough work made us possible to identify the caves and to make a comparative analyze of the data given by him and the present-day situation. We can state that the cave-descriptions given by Mátyás Bél are correct his statements and conclusions are reliable even today. On the basis of all these he can be regarded the first deliberate speleologist of the Gerecse Mountains.

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